

## ISSUE PAPER

### BLUE RIBBON PANEL FOR THE ILLINOIS RIVERS PROJECT PREPARED BY THE SAC

The National Research Council (NRC) report<sup>1</sup> on restoration of aquatic ecosystems has recognized the Illinois River as one of only three large floodplain-river ecosystems in the contiguous U.S. that retain substantial floodplains and floodpulses, despite alterations for navigation and flood protection. Because functioning floodplain ecosystems are rare and valuable, the NRC recommended that national objectives for river restoration include restoration and rehabilitation of degraded segments. Now the task is to assure the national public and decision-makers that funds will be effectively spent and the restoration will be successful. Substantial federal funding for the Illinois River Restoration will only be sustained if the Illinois River is seen as nationally important and there is broad public confidence that the funding is being effectively used. Precedents and recommendations for independent review of major water resource projects are well established at the federal level. The General Accounting Office, the National Research Council and others indicate that decisions of agencies benefit from independent peer review<sup>2</sup>. Also, the national experts who serve on the review panel become spokespersons for the project within the national scientific community.

Proposal: The SAC letter of 8 Oct. 2002 made the following recommendation to the IRCC: "We have concluded that Illinois Rivers 2020 [i.e., Illinois River restoration activities encompassing the complete package of state and federal programs directed towards river restoration] could be strengthened and better integrated if strategies were periodically reviewed by a panel that is independent of the agencies that develop and execute the plans. Progress toward program goals should also be reviewed periodically. Integration is difficult for two reasons: (1) the Basin is a mixture of very complex ecosystems integrating both natural functions and a broad range of human activity, and (2) Illinois Rivers 2020 embraces many individual programs funded through several federal and state agencies, each with their own perspectives and technical expertise."

To this end, we suggested that the IRCC empanel a Blue-Ribbon Panel of nationally-recognized scientists to review the planning and progress to date on the restoration of the Illinois River through the Illinois Rivers 2020 and federal Illinois River Ecosystem Restoration Project with a view to strengthening the integration of the projects and fostering the process of active adaptive management (an approach to restoration previously recommended by SAC and currently used in several other large-scale ecosystem restoration projects, including an adoption of this policy by the present Illinois River Projects).

The SAC recognizes that the success of plans to restore the Illinois River requires many scientific and technical decisions, some of which may be controversial. Further, the SAC recognizes that decisions

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<sup>1</sup> National Research Council. 1992. Restoration of Aquatic Ecosystems: Science, Technology, and Public Policy. National Academy Press, Washington, DC. (pp. 8, 207)

<sup>2</sup> National Research Council. Final report scheduled for release in 2004. Assessment of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Methods of Analysis and Peer Review for Water Resources Project Planning. National Academy Press, Washington, DC.

will be made considering social and economic factors as well as the biological and physical sciences. An independent scientific and technical review will ensure that the decisions being made to restore the Illinois River are based on sound science, which is clearly presented to decision makers so that all factors can be considered in final decisions. This independent review is intended to ensure that: (1) the resolution of highly complex issues has the strongest scientific support possible and (2) that the expenditure of limited financial resources is effectively informed by the best available science.

The SAC proposes that the IRCC establish a five to seven-member Blue Ribbon Panel to review plans and progress on the restoration of the Illinois River through the Illinois 2020 program. The SAC working with the staff of the Lt. Governor will submit to the IRCC the names and documentary information of 15 eminent scientists or engineers from appropriate disciplines for the selection of the five to seven members. The SAC stands ready to assist the IRCC in the review process.

Cost: Approximately \$20,000-25,000 for transportation, lodging, per diem, and honorarium. Support staff for the review would need to be provided from the Office of the Lt. Governor or the state partner for the Illinois River Projects, namely DNR.

Timing: Late Spring 2004, with consideration for repeating every three to four years

Process:

1. SAC identifies eminent scientists and engineers from appropriate disciplines to serve on the Blue Ribbon Panel and provides documentation of the credentials of each nominee.
2. The IRCC selects the five to seven primary and alternate panel members from the list provided by SAC.
3. The SAC working closely with the IRCC, staff of the Lt. Governor, Coordinator of the Illinois River Projects from IDNR, and the Coordinator for the federal government from the Rock Island District of the US Army Corps of Engineers (USCOE), prepares materials on the planning for the Illinois Restoration for distribution to the Blue Ribbon Panel.
4. In coordination with the IRCC, IDNR, and USCOE, the SAC develops a review program and schedule. This program development will include a tour of the Illinois River and a series of presentations by agency, university, and stakeholders. It is expected that after this hearing the Blue Ribbon Panel will make specific requests for additional information. The SAC working with the IRCC, staff of the Lt. Governor, IDNR, and USCOE will meet information requests.
5. The Blue Ribbon Panel will prepare and submit their report to the IRCC.

Outcomes: The Blue Ribbon Panel report will provide a high level, independent review of the restoration program for the Illinois River. The Panel report will be used to provide important feedback to the IRCC, and all agency staff and stakeholders involved in the program. The SAC expects that this independent review will strengthen project integration, enhance national visibility of the project, and demonstrate to the public that scarce funding is being used wisely.